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ABSTRACT

A study examined what factors made content area literacy learners have positive or negative attitudes toward reading at various stages and what sociocultural dimensions influenced positive or negative attitudes toward reading. Subjects, 35 Hawaii students and 18 mainland students, completed an autobiography assignment as part of a required content area reading class. Subjects were asked to consider their reading experiences from the earliest memory of being read to through elementary school years, middle, high school, and the present. In the Hawaii sample, 23% of participants revealed a consistently positive attitude toward reading and 77% exhibited periods of time where both positive and negative attitudes emerged. The mainland participants showed a similar pattern with 17% in the consistently positive category and 83% with mixed attitudes. Sociocultural factors also played a role in the subjects' attitudes toward reading, particularly for the Hawaiian students. Results also indicated that most of the negative attitudes toward reading occurred in the middle stage; most of the participants moved back to a more positive attitude in the later stage. Those students who found that their early interest in reading was rekindled at the later stage usually forged a connection between an early autobiographical interest and their chosen profession. Future research should explore the impact of courses, workshops, and seminars aimed at changing the middle stage decline in students' attitudes toward reading. (Contains eight references.) (RS)

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CONTENT AREA LITERACY STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD READING THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHY CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

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Reflecting on literacy experiences by writing an autobiography charting stages of reading development offers a unique window on attitudes toward reading. Attitudes may be defined as those feelings that cause a reader to approach or avoid a reading situation (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 1995). The sociocultural dimensions of family and school life strongly influence students attitudes toward reading (Cothern & Collins, 1992).

In a study of preservice and inservice teachers in Ohio, Manna and Misheff (1987) found that while most teachers had positive attitudes toward reading as a result of family and school experiences, 28 percent harbored negative attitudes toward reading. Their study focused on a large sample of teachers and relied on frequency counts and percentage data to portray results gleaned from 50 autobiographies.

Bean (1994) conducted a more fine-grained case study analysis of Hawaii preservice content area teachers' autobiographies in a required content area reading course. In contrast to Manna and Misheff's data, Bean found that attitudes changed over time and were highly individualistic. When preservice teachers reflected on their reading experiences at early, middle, and later stages (Chall, 1983), a number of factors played a role in the formation of positive and negative attitudes. For example, positive reading experiences occurred in rural, modest income settings when parents or other family members offered a positive model, read to children, and provided books in the home. School and teachers played a powerful

role in developing students' attitudes toward reading. At the secondary level, English teachers were often mentioned as influential. Additionally, positive reading experiences were found in rural, modest income families where English was a second language. A supportive home setting, reading to children, and access to bookmobile services made a difference along with books keyed to the various cultures represented in the case studies (e.g. Hawaiian, Japanese, Filipino). Negative associations corresponded to not being read to as a child, being labeled in reading groups, family upheaval, reading aloud in front of the class, book reports, and misuse of placement tests. The 45 preservice teachers in Bean's study displayed positive and negative experiences at various stages of reading development suggesting that attitude toward reading is not a fixed aspect of preservice teachers' development.

The purpose of the present study was to replicate and extend the previous study (Bean, 1994) by including a more diverse sample of Hawaii and mainland content area literacy students. This more broad-based sample included preservice and inservice teachers, traditional and non-traditional students, elementary and secondary teachers, and cross-cultural representation from Hawaiian, Japanese-American, and Caucasian groups. The earlier study explored the following questions: a) who influences positive or negative attitudes toward reading? b) what books and materials played a key role in positive or negative attitudes? c) where do these preservice teachers get books to read? and, d) what claims are made by these preservice teachers about guiding their students reading of texts and developing a desire to read for enjoyment?).

The present study moves beyond those questions and addresses two critical issues: a) what made students have a positive or negative attitude toward reading at various stages? b) what sociocultural dimensions influenced positive or negative attitudes toward reading?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 53 participants completed a reading autobiography assignment in a required content area reading class spanning the periods Fall, 1993, through Spring, 1994. In Hawaii, the course in content area reading/writing is required for secondary Basic Certification and it serves as an elective for graduate students pursuing a Professional Certificate. Taken together, a total of 35 Hawaii students completed the autobiography assignment. There were 25 preservice content area teachers and 10 inservice. Majors in the preservice group included 5 social studies, 3 English, 2 art, 1 agriculture, 8 science, 2 Hawaiian studies, 1 Japanese studies, and 3 mathematics. There were 9 elementary professional certificate students and 1 in secondary English. All were non-traditional students defined as 27 years or older. There were 7 Hawaiian students, 15 Japanese-American, and 13 Caucasian, with 24 females and 11 males.

A comparative sample of 18 mainland students completed the autobiography assignment in the Spring, 1994, semester. This course was required for all English majors as well as elementary preservice teachers who must have a second major in an area such as reading and language arts. In addition, the course services graduate students

seeking secondary licensure. There were 9 preservice elementary students, 4 preservice secondary English students, and 5 graduate students. There were 17 Caucasian students and 1 Hawaiian student. All but 7 were non-traditional students. There were 15 female and 3 male students.

Materials and Procedure

In one of the early class meetings, students were asked to complete the reading autobiography assignment. They were asked to consider their reading experiences from the earliest memory of being read to through elementary school years, middle, high school, and the present. They were asked to comment on what they read, feelings associated with reading or being read to, key people who influenced their feelings about reading, and places where they acquired books. The typed autobiographies ran 2-3 pages for most students.

The autobiographies were given an initial impressionistic reading by both authors and coded globally for positive or negative attitude statements. For example, a positive statement would be: "Like my parents, I love to read--books on Hawaiian flora, magazines on sheep raising..." A negative statement would be: "However much I enjoyed the subject I was taking, I always hated the textbook." Following this initial reading, each autobiography was again reviewed and searched for key words and phrases that revealed attitudes within beginning (grades 0 to 5), middle (grades 6-12), and later (college and work) stages of reading development (Chall, 1993). A case study coding form was used to record key phrases and code attitudes as: a) positive +; b) mixed + & -; or, c) negative - for each autobiography. Negative statements made about reading at any

stage generally resulted in an overall attitude coding of mixed (+ or -). Percentage of agreement for coding was 97%; disagreements were resolved through conferencing.

RESULTS

Overall Sample

In the Hawaii sample, 23% of the participants revealed a consistently positive attitude toward reading and 77% exhibited periods of time where both positive and negative attitudes emerged; no one displayed consistently negative attitudes. The mainland participants showed a similar pattern with 17% in the consistently positive category and 83% with mixed attitudes.

The analysis by stages of reading development indicates that most of the negative attitudes toward reading occurred in the middle stage; most of these participants moved back to a more positive attitude in the later stage. At the early stage of reading development (0-5th grade) for the Hawaii sample, 77% had positive attitudes, 17% mixed, and 6% negative. These data parallel the earlier study of Hawaii preservice teachers (Bean, 1994). At the middle stage (6-12th grade), only 32% maintained a positive attitude while 57% displayed a mixed attitude and 11% were negative. In the later stage of reading development (college and work), 63% were positive, 31% mixed, and 6% negative.

At the early stage of reading development (0-5th grade) for the mainland sample, 61% had positive attitudes, 28% mixed, and 11% negative. At the middle stage (6-12th grade), only 22% maintained a positive attitude while 28% displayed a mixed attitude and 50% were negative. In the later stage of reading development

(college and work), 61% were positive, 39% mixed. Thus, for both the Hawaii and mainland samples, the middle stage of reading development showed a precipitous decline in attitudes toward reading. Traditional students in the mainland sample had less positive overall attitudes toward reading than their non-traditional peers. Just 13% revealed consistently positive attitudes while 22% of the non-traditional students had positive attitudes.

Preservice and inservice teachers had comparable overall attitudes toward reading as did male and female students. Despite the apparent homogenized nature of Golden Books, basal readers, texts, and other home and school experiences, some differences emerged when Hawaiian, Japanese-American, and Caucasian groups were examined for overall reading attitudes and across stages of reading development.

For the 8 Hawaiian students in this sample, none had overall positive attitudes toward reading. Rather 100% displayed mixed attitudes. At the early stage, 63% showed positive attitudes, 25% mixed, and 12% negative. By the middle stage, 12% were positive, 63% mixed, and 25% negative. Little change occurred in the later stage where 25% were positive, 50% mixed, and 25% were negative.

The 15 Japanese-American students in the study exhibited a similar pattern of attitudes. Just 7% had a positive attitude and 93% were mixed. At the early stage, 73% showed positive attitudes, 20% mixed, and 7% negative. By the middle stage, this changed to 13% positive, 67% mixed, and 20% negative. For this group, positive change occurred in the later stage where 60% were positive and 40% mixed.

The 30 Caucasian students displayed a similar pattern in the early stages but a contrasting pattern of attitudes at the middle stage. Overall, 33% had a consistently positive attitude, 67% were mixed. At the early stage, 73% had a positive attitude, 20% mixed, and 7% negative. By the middle stage, only 40% had a positive attitude while 33% were mixed and 27% negative. At the later stage, 73% had a positive attitude and 27% were mixed.

For all groups in Hawaii and on the mainland the middle stage produced negative feelings toward reading, usually based on the increasingly complex and seemingly uninteresting content of textbooks. Many students returned to a positive attitude toward reading as they regained control of their book selection. However, for some groups of students, notably the 8 Hawaiian students, early positive attitudes toward reading were eroded by middle stage experiences and never recovered.

To complete a more fine-grained case study analysis of the Hawaii and mainland samples, we selected 5 cases from the Hawaii sample and 5 from the mainland sample that encompassed the range of attitudes and other categories represented in the overall sample of 53 students. In order to answer the questions, "what made students have a positive or negative attitude toward reading?" and, "what sociocultural dimensions influenced positive or negative attitudes toward reading?" we examined 2 cases from Hawaii and 1 from the mainland sample that represent overall positive attitudes toward reading. In addition, 3 Hawaii cases and 4 mainland cases will be considered to shed light on mixed attitudes toward reading.

Positive Attitude Case Study Examples

Dennis Sugiyama was a preservice math teacher with a lifelong love of reading. "I read every book I could find on octopus and sharks." He commented on reading school textbooks, car stereo magazines, Hawaii Fishing News, and the fact that his mother was an avid reader.

Carol Sanborn was an elementary teacher. "I grew up with many books, little t.v., and lots of time. My parents always read and elementary school years I remember being read to after recess." She concluded her autobiography by saying, "I will not fall asleep without reading."

Joan Bensen was a preservice traditional student in the mainland pursuing a credential in elementary education. "My parents read to me as far back as I can remember--Dr. Seuss, Where the Wild Things Are. My parents are both avid readers." Her middle stage experiences were remembered fondly with an interest in mysteries and school reading material. "Books are like old friends." She said when she was on semester break she would read as many as 4 to 5 novels each week.

Each of these students had very positive early reading experiences which carried them through the difficult middle stage of reading texts. Through early immersion in books and being read to, they developed a lifelong and consistent love of reading. But for many students, the literacy path is much more rocky.

Mixed Attitude Case Study Examples

Clifford Toyama, a preservice art student, started off with very positive early experiences. His parents read to him every night from

Mother Goose and his third grade teacher read aloud. "I used to look forward to hearing these stories. My elementary school reading experiences were quite pleasant." However, this all changed when he advanced to the middle level. "My middle school years marked the beginning of the end for my love of reading." He mentions assigned readings and textbooks where "reading became a chore instead of fun." Clifford returned to a positive attitude when he went away to college in the mainland. He praised self-selection of books--"the biggest difference was the ability to choose."

Evan Kanahele, a Hawaiian student interested in teaching secondary science, also got off to a positive start in reading. "I remember my mom reading Bible stories and daily trips to the small library that served the Keaukaha community." He recalled reading Dr. Seuss, The Little Engine That Could, and Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel. "I remember reading in front of class. I felt comfortable doing this because my mom made me read aloud at home." But experiences in the middle stage were much less positive. "SRA kits. My friends had difficulty reading and were sent to a remedial reading class." Evan said, "my reading was limited to required reading by my teachers. I never read outside of class because it was considered uncool and mainly because I was more interested in playing volleyball and basketball. As I reflect back on my teenage years, I am amazed at how little I read." In the college years, Evan "continued to read only what was required by my professors." More recently, he resumed reading science-fiction novels and Sports Illustrated along with technical material. "I read

articles that relate to my research in yeast genetics. I find reading to be an enjoyable recreational activity."

Malia Nihipali was a non-traditional Hawaiian student who planned to teach secondary science. Like Evan, she started out liking reading. "My teacher (first grade) gave us each a book to take home. This was the seed that sprouted a brand new reading career that would last the rest of my life." Although she could not recall being read to much as a child at home, the influence of school was very powerful. She read a number of local Hawaii authors that held her interest. In the middle stage she maintained an interest in recreational reading while disliking content texts. "However much I enjoyed the subject I was taking, I always hated the textbook." Her early love of reading was rekindled at the later stage. "I started to read more legends of my culture. She read a collection of Hawaiian folklore, as well as Kamakau's Ruling Chiefs of Hawaii and David Malo's Hawaiian Antiquities. Demands from college classes reminded her that "I hardly have any time to sit down with a good book."

Kinny Steinway is a traditional elementary undergraduate student in the mainland sample. Her early reading experiences were largely negative. "I have no memories of anybody reading to me. I had a lot of books (Disney; Dr. Seuss), but without the interest of my parents in reading to me I slowly quit reading as I grew older." Once content area texts were introduced she read only if she had to. Her mother was an avid reader of romance novels and "my father never read, not even the newspaper--instead he watched television or worked outside." These negative experiences spanned the middle stage and extended somewhat into the later stage. "Today I still

don't read a lot. I either have homework or I want to spend my free time outside or doing crafts. When I do happen to find a great book I refuse to put it aside. So it's not that I hate to read. I do buy books and borrow. Nobody really created a love of reading for me."

Jennifer Yancy was a non-traditional preservice English major. "My mother was an avid reader. I was always in the top reading group." She recalled her third grade teacher reading to the class and she had the opportunity to self-select animal books. However, by sixth grade, "my teacher required a book report once a month and I wasn't able to keep up. I was a slow reader...I soured on reading." Her family moved in the middle of seventh grade. "I felt stupid." This feeling persisted into high school until she became involved in a drill team and achieved a high grade point average. In college she said, "I thought I was going to die under the heavy load of college level reading. I felt stupid." As an adult, she said, "reading is not my favorite pastime." Yet she joined a women's book club to share and discuss books and she reads to her children from Bill Peet's work.

Kalau Naeole was the only Hawaiian student in the mainland sample. She was a non-traditional, preservice elementary student. She recalled an array of negative beginning reading experiences. Although they had Disney books and encyclopedias at home, Kalau said, "I started to hate reading when I went to second grade because we had family problems at home." She recalled the Dick and Jane basal readers and said, "I was in the lowest reading group...I was ashamed." This rocky start persisted in high school where "as a senior I realized I had a reading problem because of my comprehension." However, as an adult, Kalau landed a job as a

teacher aide in the local school system's reading program. "The people who turned me on to reading was the teacher I worked with. Also my children's literature teacher."

Maggie McClellan was a traditional preservice elementary student. As a child her kindergarten teacher aunt created a love of reading. "I read anything I could get my hands on at home." By junior high, "my love for reading turned sour. I had textbooks to cart home every night with demands on what I would read. The library turned into a treacherous home for research. Reading was a dreaded and painful task that only nerds and dorks spent any time doing." Fortunately, Maggie's early love of reading returned in the later stage "when I took reading with Professor Mathewson. I now incorporate reading into my daily life just as I had before. I love to read those fictional suspense stories."

Thus, for some of the participants in this study, the dull texts of the middle stage only temporarily short-circuited their love of reading. For others, attitudes forged early on persisted into the later stages of reading development.

DISCUSSION

The 53 participants mentioned an array of experiences that influenced their attitudes toward reading at the three stages. Positive features mentioned for the early stage of reading included: bedtime stories, being read to by family members and teachers, library visits, books in the home and book ownership, parents who were readers, Bible stories, and the bookmobile. Negative influences included: not being read to, round robin oral reading in school, book

reports, ability grouping, and parents working long hours with little time for reading.

At the middle stage, where a precipitous decline in reading attitude occurred, the positive features mentioned were: book sharing and exchange with friends, book catalogs in school and self selection, reading as an escape, journal writing versus book reports, book clubs, field trips linked to text readings, and books taken on fishing trips to pass the time. Additional positive aspects involved writing original romance novels based on teen romances, exploring information in encyclopedias, learning to use metacognitive textbook author aids, and influential teachers who made a subject come alive. Negative dimensions included dull textbooks and reading as "a chore." As one student said, "The library turned into a treacherous home for research." Other negative aspects mentioned by the 53 participants included: SRA kit levels for their impact on a student's self image as a good or poor reader along with intimidating speed reading tasks. Athletics and socializing were seen as more inticing while reading assignments produced fatigue. Family upheaval and divorce influenced reading attitudes, as did working long hours in a high school job where little time was left for reading.

A number of characteristics helped rekindle a love of reading for some participants at the later stage of work and college study. Books connected to professional development in a career and the ability to self-select books were crucial positive factors. Taking a children's literature class rekindled many future teachers' excitement about reading. International travel, military service, hobbies, reading to children, belonging to a women's book club,

working in a bookstore or library, and working in a school reading program were positive influences. A spouse or peer's enthusiasm for reading helped many of these participants leave the negative aspects of the middle stage behind. However, a number of negative dimensions persisted. Among these were: reading for information more than pleasure, reading for a grade, and the literary canon. Guilt associated with reading enjoyable books versus those required for university courses and working long hours interfered with reading enjoyment.

Those students who found that their early interest in reading was rekindled at the later stage despite a drop-off in the middle stage usually forged a connection between an early autobiographical interest and their chosen profession. For example, a natural sciences major who was raised in Alaska surrounded by her father's extensive collection of wildlife readings gravitated toward natural sciences materials. Commenting on this late blooming aspect of her attitude toward reading, she said: "My relationship with books has not always been this way, but some good things take time."

Although forging connections between personal interests and reading may take time, classroom teachers can influence this process. Indeed, in one classroom study, researchers found that when students wrote about autobiographical experiences prior to reading related literature they had a personal investment in their reading (Hamann, Schultz, Smith, & White, 1991).

Sociocultural factors also played a role in the participants' attitudes toward reading in the present study. This was particularly evident in the case of the 8 Hawaiian students. At the middle stage,

only one student recalled reading materials related to Hawaiian culture. All 8 found that textbooks were onerous. At the later stage, one participant commented on reading legends of Hawaii and culturally related texts. Another said she would love to have time to read Hawaiian material in the native language. A science major said he viewed readings related to his interest in yeast genetics positively. All but 2 of the 8 had mixed or negative attitudes toward reading at the later stage. These negative attitudes were prompted by the demands of textbooks and a lack of time for other reading.

Thus, for this underrepresented group, little effort was made to connect readings at the middle level with cultural interests. We might expect this to change as the current renaissance in Hawaiian culture and language continues in island schools. For the one Hawaiian student in the mainland sample, she developed a love of reading late in life as a result of a teacher's aide position in reading and a required children's literature class for elementary certification.

Many of the 53 participants in this study used reading as an escape from the humdrum texts they were assigned at the middle stage. Given the growing body of multicultural young adult literature and the potential for creating a comparative crosscultural curriculum, the middle stage of reading development should become much more inticing than it has been. However, studies of adolescent readers suggest this is not yet the case.

In a study of 90 college freshmen enrolled in a developmental reading and study improvement course, their reading autobiographies revealed a substantial lack of interest in reading, despite positive early experiences (Duchein & Mealey, 1993).

Indeed, the majority of these students had not read a book for pleasure in years. They expressed positive views of early reading experiences where teachers read aloud in class but this practice disappeared for most participants by 4th grade. Regular in-class time allotted to reading also diminished as they advanced through the grades. The most important finding in relation to the present study involved the rare cases where middle and high school teachers read aloud to their classes. Participants had vivid, long-lasting memories of this practice and it caused them to value those classes where reading aloud occurred. Typically, this occurred in English classes. Consistent with the present study, Duchein and Mealey found that college freshmen indicated their book reading dropped off significantly by high school. These students attributed their current reading difficulties in comprehension, vocabulary, critical thinking, and metacognition to a lack of extensive reading in high school. Duchein and Mealey argued that attitude is a powerful determinant of reading frequency. They assigned a novel that students initially balked at reading due to its daunting length (664 pages). But when students finished reading Pat Conroy's Prince of Tides , 49 percent reported they wanted to read more.

In another study of reading attitudes, Vogel and Zancanella (1991) conducted a case study of 4 adolescents who had rich literary interests outside school and outside the prescribed canon. One loved baseball and another pursued romance novels. They each saw a real connection between these outside pleasure books and their personal life themes and interests. In contrast, literature in school was to be read and interpreted from the viewpoint of the teacher. On rare

occasions, these domains intersected. For example, the student interested in romances responded positively to reading The Scarlet Letter required in class.

The important implication in our study is that this crossover needs to happen much more frequently, particularly at the middle stage and especially for students whose culture may not be well represented in school reading materials.

Teachers need to become as well informed as possible about young adult literature and develop the conditional knowledge to create units and lessons that capitalize on this literature. Additionally, if textbooks are revealed to be detrimental to sustaining an interest in reading, content teachers need to develop and incorporate a repertoire of strategies to get students more actively involved in their textbooks. These strategies need to replace our traditional "read and answer chapter questions" approach to content learning. Future studies should explore the impact of courses, workshops, and seminars aimed at changing the middle stage decline in students' attitudes toward reading charted in this study and others.

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